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## How Does Music Connect the Artist and Fans?

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### How does Music Connect the Artist and Fans?

Music as an art has been around for thousands of years. With the evolution of music in popular culture comes a rise in countless genres and subgenres. Audiences have the orchestra which has been entertaining them since the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century; meanwhile there have also been different tastes and genres that have risen throughout the decades, such as the jazz era of the 1920s and 1930s, the big band sound of the 1950s, the hair-metal and techno-filled '80s, and the angsty grunge era of the early-to-mid 1990s. Even today shows a change in contemporary music tastes, and we see different groups of people enjoying many different styles of rock music, country, hip-hop and rap, pop, the list goes on.

All these styles and subgenres bring with them different subcultures and fanbases. Dick Hebdige recounts in his book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* that there are three main themes to subculture phenomena: “the status and meaning of revolt, the idea of style as a form of Refusal, the elevation of crime into art (even though, in our case, the “crimes” are only broken codes” (2). The first two can be easily applied to the grunge and post-grunge subgenres. Not only that, but if the lyrical text is studied and considered enough, thoughts and true feelings of an artist, and a possible mental illness like depression come through. Specifically analyzing the work of four artists from the grunge and post-grunge eras; unfortunately, all of them no longer alive: Nirvana’s Kurt Cobain, Soundgarden’s (among other projects) Chris Cornell, Lane Staley of Alice in Chains and Mad Season, and Chester Bennington from Linkin Park, how does their

lyrical style reflect their inner struggles with depression, and how do they influence the emotions and decisions of their fans, who may also be struggling?

First, the most notable example would be Kurt Cobain. Cobain committed suicide in 1994, not long after he released *In Utero* with Nirvana. Many of his songs' lyrics apply heavy and taboo subjects to their content, such as sexual assault or homosexuality. However, if delved within deep enough, listeners get a taste of what was going through his mind at the time. For example, lyrics in the song "Pennyroyal Tea" state points such as "I'm a liar and a thief," "I'm so tired I can't sleep," and even "distill the life that's inside of me." The context of "Rape Me," also on *In Utero*, states that Cobain wrote the song not only as a statement in support of women and against violence towards them, but it also relates to his feelings on being constantly harassed and chased, or "raped" by the media.

Grunge was an era of angst and anger, and audiences see that reflected in the songs of the time. Chris Cornell and Layne Staley also committed suicide later in their lives. Cobain and Staley died very young, at twenty-seven and thirty-four, respectively, while Chris Cornell died later in his life at age fifty-two. Chris Cornell fronted the band Soundgarden, while also playing co-lead alongside Eddie Vedder in the band Temple of the Dog, and singing for the supergroup Audioslave in the early-to-mid 2000s with members from Rage Against the Machine. "Rusty Cage," a song off Soundgarden's third album, reflects Cornell's feelings of being trapped by depression and wanting to escape, as heard in the refrain "I'm gonna break my rusty cage and run." Regarding another Soundgarden song, the hit "Black Hole Sun," Cornell had stated that it was more of a stream-of-consciousness type of writing for its lyrics. However, a fan may interpret them as having a black hole suck away the "rain" or pain-ridden grunge era and depression.

Layne Staley, by comparison, dealt with a depression that coincided with drug addiction, dying from an overdose in 2002. Lane and his style was very heavy, and derived from the collaborative songwriting between himself and his friend and Alice bandmate Jerry Cantrell. Nobody can really replicate how Staley's voice sounds, and that's what made Alice In Chains music so unique; a unique vocal talent is what makes many of these artists' styles unique to their band. Regarding how the lyrics communicate what Staley was feeling in his heart and brain, the Alice In Chains song "Down in a Hole" can be interpreted to mean two completely different things; if analyzed from Jerry Cantrell's point of view, it is a song dedicated to his wife. However, from Layne's perspective, it talks about his struggles and fight with addiction. The song "River of Deceit" by Mad Season, a supergroup Staley was a part of, tells the story of a person who wants all their problems and pain to be stripped away, and how hard they are to shake. Lyrics like "My pain is self-chosen" and "I could either drown or pull off my skin and swim to shore" are blatant enough to send the message, but the layman may not understand the context as much as someone in the artist's, in this case Layne's, shoes.

The final artist to go over is Linkin Park's Chester Bennington. Bennington, like the others, committed suicide, dying on July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2017 at only forty-one years old. Out of all the artists listed, he hid the internal struggle of depression better than any of them. He was always so energetic on stage, always had a smile on his face, and always fed off the crowds' energy, having fun on- and off-stage. Many Linkin Park songs' lyrics derive from his struggles with abuse and depression as a teenager and through his life, especially on the albums *Hybrid Theory* (2000), *Meteora* (2003); while their most recent release, *One More Light* (2017), was possibly the most personal album from a songwriting point of view for Chester, relaying many of his internal

struggles, as well as those from others in his life. The album has come to mean a final goodbye to his fans, as he took his own life just two months after its release.

In their earlier work with *Hybrid Theory* and *Meteora*, Linkin Park's nu-metal, abrasive sound in the music fused fantastically with the vocal interplay between Bennington and co-lead vocalist Mike Shinoda. Singles such as "Crawling," "In the End," and "Somewhere I Belong" were heavily influenced by Chester's struggles with drugs and physical and emotional abuse growing up. The lyrics in "Crawling" and "Somewhere I Belong" encompass his demons with lines such as "these wounds they will not heal" and "I want to let go of the pain I've felt so long" in their respective songs. The topics of abuse, pain, and loneliness change and morph from song to song, while keeping within the themes of these two albums. These songs were chosen because their lyrical content best explains what had been swimming in Chester's mind while he hid it so well on the outside. On the flip-side of the coin is the title track from *One More Light*, which was written about a friend of the band who had died of cancer, and the lyrics ask and answer the question "who cares if one more light goes out? Well, I do." After Chester's passing, the band, the fans, as well as his wife and family all fell onto the receiving end of the lyrics' meaning; the fans have even used it as an anthem to support each other and keep Bennington's legacy alive.

So, how does the meaning of these songs tie back into the fans of the artists? There are a few ways. Firstly, there is a certain appeal to celebrities that leaves an impact on the fans, whether they're college age, high-school age, or even middle-aged people; this can be seen a lot in advertising and promotions of products, based on factors such as likability, similarity, and familiarity (Jeyaradha & Kamalakannan). This can also tie into the quasi-personal connection the fans feel to the artist when they are seeing their favorite band or other musical act live at a

concert. Because fans see their favorite artists in person at a concert, the possibility of being even remotely in their vicinity makes fans feel more welcome around them.

The second way the lyrical content can relate to fans of an artist going through mental health struggles is through the fans' own mental health. According to John Maltby et. al, there are cases of celebrity worship that can psychologically alter a person's mental well-being. Factors such as age, education, marital status, and even employment status can have a relationship to the degree of celebrity worship a person has. On average based on the study conducted by Maltby and his colleagues, while no significant relationships were found, there are possibilities that celebrity worship wanes with age and the higher amount of education one receives, as well as no time to devote to celebrities between those that are married and/or have a job. However, it also does not have to be as scientific. It could be as simple as having a good time or relating to the celebrity to give them an out for their own struggles in life.

Now, the opposite can also be said; that fans might not feel a connection to the lyrics at all. That is true; not everyone can directly relate to the feelings and mental issues that their favorite artist may have. Groups of fans of Nirvana and Soundgarden may have plenty of people that enjoy the music just for the sake of enjoying the music. However, there are fans that do relate more to what the lyrics really mean. Nobody truly knows what someone else is going through, and that's why people have a relatable escape through the messages in their favorite songs by artists like these.

Another counterpoint can be made that there is a possibility that a certain message that the band wants to convey in a song doesn't reach the fans. This can also be true; people have differing interpretations of lyrics and meaning. However, in songs like "One More Light" and "Rusty Cage," the lyrics directly imply the meaning and message that the band wants to

communicate. The message in “One More Light” is that people do care if someone they are close to ends their life, whether intentionally or through ways they cannot control such as terminal disease. The meaning of “Rusty Cage” implies that Cornell wants to break free of his depression and hopefully never deal with it again.

Others may also think that even though cases such as these artists’ suicides had brought the severity of the issues of mental illness and depression into the spotlight, nothing is truly being done to figure out how to fight back against these mental illnesses. This is also false, as many organizations and charities exist, whether in an artist’s honor or not, to fight against depression and other similar illnesses. Chester Bennington’s widow, Talinda, as well as the other band members of Linkin Park have worked tirelessly to make sure Chester’s legacy lives on; they have also been extremely supportive on social media to other fans, making sure that as they all grieve over the loss of a loved one, bandmate, and icon, that the fans and those closest to Chester fight and support each other as one family. Talinda and the band have also made sure that fans and others know about the One More Light Fund and “320” funds that can be donated to in honor of Chester and towards the branch of Music for Relief that is dedicated to mental illness research.

To summarize all this analysis, there are many factors that can relate a musical artist’s struggles with depression and other mental issues such as addiction and/or anxiety to their own fanbases’ personal struggles with the same problems. The way a musical artist such as Kurt Cobain, Chris Cornell, Layne Staley, or Chester Bennington dealt with and communicated these issues is through their lyrical content in the music. Songs such as “Pennyroyal Tea,” “Black Hole Sun,” “Down in a Hole” and “Somewhere I Belong” all relate to each singer’s struggles with mental illness and depression in one way or another. Fans can relate to the messages whether

they are dealing with the same issues or not. Every fan in a subculture has a sense of community within that subculture, and that can stem from just one person who decided to make music their passion and use it as a cry for help.

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